

Your Child's Health

Reasoning Behind the Common Cough

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by
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'Tis the season---for coughs of all kinds and sounds. Cough is part of many "normal" winter viral illnesses. The mild cough that comes with a runny nose, scratchy throat and otherwise minor illness is irritating but does little harm. This is often just drainage down the back of the throat or irritation of the airway. It is best treated with a simple cough suppressant like dextromethorphan and a decongestant. (You can ask the pharmacist for help.) Drinking plenty of liquids will keep the cough looser. Avoiding strenuous activity will lessen the strain of the illness on the system, too.

Some coughs need more attention, though. As one mother asked me, "How will I know when to panic?" I don't recommend panic but there are some danger signals that should get you to your doctor.

Difficulty breathing

Rapid breathing

High fever

Difficulty swallowing

Blue or gray color

Difficulty breathing does not

mean because of a stuffy nose. If the child has trouble breathing with his mouth open then you need help. Breathing is always faster with fever so get the fever down then recheck the breathing. High

fever with cough, especially if the illness is sudden, may be serious. (Remember though to look at the child as a whole and not just the fever. If after a dose of fever medicine he wants to go skiing its probably not serious.) Difficulty swallowing may either be from a very severe sore throat or because of rapid or labored breathing. If either problem comes with a cough call your doctor. Poor color is obvious. Check lips and finger nails.

I've discovered that in different parts of the country different words are used to describe a cough. Just so you will know what I'm talking about here are some definitions. A croupy cough is tight and barky (like a seal) with a sharp sound. There may be crowing noises as the child breathes in. Wheezing is a musical sound that comes from deep in the chest with breathing out. A loose cough sounds rattly or mucousy and wet. The rattles you feel in a chest are from mucus that could be as far away as the nose. A dry (or hacky) cough may sound tight but is not sharp like croup and often goes with colds.

This time of year most of the coughs I see are loose ones. These are often from drainage down the back of the throat. Sometimes these loose coughs are caused by bronchitis which is usually a mild

illness in children though the cough may be very annoying. A loose cough with high fever in a child who looks ill may be pneumonia.

Croup season is coming, though. Croup is swelling of the lining of the main airway just below the vocal cords. There are different kinds of croup but the most common one is caused by a virus. It starts like a mild cold then at 2 in the morning you find yourself up with a child who can't breathe. Many parents have been embarrassed to call out the doctor only to arrive at the emergency room with a perfectly normal child! There is a good reason for this. The cold night air works to relieve croup just like an ice pack relieves a swollen ankle. If your child has any of the danger signals above call your doctor. Otherwise the best thing you can do is have the child breathe cold, preferably damp air. You can open a window and run a vaporizer or just go outside for a few minutes. When the attack is better the child will rest more comfortably if you turn down the heat some and keep running a vaporizer. A hint about croup: It isn't how much noise the child is making with his breathing that counts, it's how well he is breathing that is important.

The kid who coughs for weeks after every cold, or who gets wheezy with colds or exercise may

have very mild asthma. Mild asthma is something to consider when a child has "chronic bronchitis," too. More severe asthma can cause as much difficulty breathing as croup. Both can cause the patient to pull in the chest muscles (retract) with each breath. The cough of asthma lacks the distinctive bark of croup, though. And while croup is a noisy disease it doesn't cause the high pitched musical wheezes of asthma. An asthma look-alike that occurs in babies is bronchiolitis. The babies have little or no fever. They have a wheezy cough and may work really hard to breathe. This too is a virus. Most of the time this can be handled at home but check with your doctor.

Cough, like fever, is just a symptom, not a disease. It tells you something is wrong but not how serious the problem is. Remember to look for the danger signals; is the child breathing easily, how does he look over all, what other symptoms does he have besides the cough? If in doubt, call your doctor!

Dr. Ferguson is a Heber City pediatrician, a specialist in the care of children from birth to 18 years. If there is something you would like Dr. Ferguson to write about, address your question to Mountainland Medical Clinic, 30 South 500 East, Heber, Utah, 84032.

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